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# SPECIAL LIBRARIES

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## Training for Special Librarianship

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**B**EFORE we can talk about training for special librarianship we must have a clear picture of how special libraries differ from other libraries.

In 1912, M. S. Dudgeon summarized the features of the special library which distinguished it from the general library in these paragraphs, which are as pertinent today as they were then:

In a *general reference library* the predominating material is books. In a *special library* the material of the most vital importance is not in books — often it is not even in print.

In a *general reference library* the material is stored, classified, and catalogued so that it constitutes a fertile field into which an investigator can go and glean out information bearing upon his subject. In a *special reference library* the information is already gleaned, made up and concentrated into portable parcels, by the librarian, and is ready to be delivered to the special worker too busy to investigate for himself.

A *general reference library* is a storehouse of perfectly good well-authenticated though possibly somewhat antique information on subjects or phases of subjects no longer current. The *special library* is a clearing house of live ideas on live problems, many of the ideas being still in a formative stage.

A *reference library* is an academic institution for the scholar. A *special library* is a utilitarian establishment calculated to serve the worker too busy to take time for scholarly investigation. Often such scholarly attainments as are involved in the investigational work must be furnished by the librarian. The special librarian becomes in fact a bureau of investigation.

A *general reference library* is preservative. A *special library* is creative.

A *general reference library* deals largely with

the past; it deals with the present and the future only incidentally. The *special library* deals primarily with the present and the future; it deals only incidentally with the past.

The view of a *general reference library* is retrospective; historical. The *special librarian* must have a vision of the future that is almost prophetic.

Along with the discovery of information to meet a specific need, the job of the special librarian involves a knowledge of the activities, present and future, of the group he serves and a continuing survey of current print in order to note information of value to anyone in the group and to bring it to the immediate attention of the department or official whose work it would promote.

Another factor that must be considered is the acute need of personnel equipped to organize and administer, since the opportunities in the special library field are not as assistants in existing libraries but as librarians-in-charge of new libraries. This may be unfortunate since it would be well for every new recruit to be able to secure some experience under the direction of a person long in the field. However, we must face facts. Special librarians do not have an opportunity to get training in library techniques on the job, but must know how to proceed from the start. Although there are innumerable possibilities, the Special Libraries Association has hesitated to work for the formation of new libraries because

of the lack of this trained personnel. That is why the Association feels so strongly that our training agencies should be interested in understanding this need and meeting it — thus providing employment for many capable people.

The training situation today for work in special libraries parallels rather closely the conditions that existed in the early days of public library development in this country. Then there were no trained librarians and hence, our pioneers in the movement — with no techniques developed, no codes by which to be guided, with classification schemes in the making, subject heading lists unrecorded — had to struggle, confer, progress by trial and error step by step, sometimes failing, but more often succeeding. In any case, it was a long, hard road that has led to our present-day, well-equipped library schools, our codes, and our established techniques which have put the library profession in the United States in the forefront of the movement.

Now let us look at the special library field which has had its greatest development since the war. Its pioneers were, to be sure, mostly those who had had training in our library schools and experience in our public libraries. Nevertheless, the conditions that had to be met, the psychology of the clientele, the demands of speed, were all very different from public library problems, and required an unusual gift for adaptation. So once again this group, even as the earlier one, had to struggle, discuss, confer, experiment, make mistakes, fail and succeed. Today these pioneers are, for the most part, still the active, forward-looking and directing heads of the libraries in this field.

But what of the future? The heads of business corporations, social service organizations, law firms, newspapers, insurance companies and all other fields in which special libraries are a factor, have come to expect the efficient service

to which they have become accustomed in other departments of their organization and are not willing to employ a library worker who cannot offer assurance of equal ability and experience. They are demanding librarians with a background of specialization in the field which they expect to enter, with training in the literature and the methods of specialization, with a pleasing personality and good appearance, not necessarily very young but with youthful outlook and adaptability, and the ability to meet the heavy demands of modern business.

The Special Libraries Association is finding it difficult to provide such workers to replace those retiring or to fill the new positions which are being made. There are at present two sources from which to draw: public libraries and library schools. However, recruits from neither of these groups are fitted for immediate entry to the field without some sort of apprenticeship — internship might be a better term. As a result of work on the part of the Special Libraries Association for new libraries, most of the positions opening up call for organizers and administrators. Even the graduates of the present course in special library administration offered by the Columbia University School of Library Service are not as well equipped to undertake such positions as they should be. This is no reflection on the course but is due to the fact that, as at present planned, it is only a two-point course and does not allow sufficient time for the thoroughness necessary. What is the answer? There is only one — at least a certain number of our library schools, with due regard to geographical distribution, should offer properly planned courses taught by a faculty having at least some practical experience in the field.

Those of us in the Special Libraries Association, who have been concerned with problems of employment and prop-

erly trained personnel, have watched with interest the adaptation by our training agencies of their curricula to meet the demands of children's work, of school libraries, and more recently of county libraries, although I believe that field is not yet thoroughly taken care of. Whether the fact that these agencies serve the public while most special libraries serve a private group has been the reason for the rather meager attempts to meet this type of special training, I cannot say. It, doubtless, has been one factor. Another one that seems to be insuperable in the minds of our library school faculties is the overwhelming variety of subjects covered in special libraries and of types of organizations served.

This latter consideration, as I said, seems to have been the real stumbling block. I presume the reason for this is that the training agencies have felt that it would be impossible to plan a special libraries course to cover every subject in an already overcrowded curriculum. With this contention I agree. No library school could hope to offer courses covering such widely varying subjects as chemistry, religion, banking, foreign affairs, etc.

But is the subject background the primary consideration in the training? To this I would say — not for the library school. Knowledge of the subject must be acquired either in pre-library school training while in college, through post-graduate work, or on the job. I hear objections immediately. If not subject training, then what is required? The answer is plain — adaptation of traditional courses and methods to the demands of special library service.

Let us return to the subject training for a moment — or rather to the means by which it may be secured. In *our* minds this is a long-standing need of the whole profession — the need for a well-

planned program in which the A.L.A. and S.L.A. might well coöperate looking toward a better selection of new recruits in the profession. It cannot be too strongly urged that discriminating selection of those planning to study for the profession is one of our greatest needs today. Greater frankness as to the personality and ability to succeed of prospective students would save much heartache on the part of the individuals concerned, as well as cutting down our own list of unemployables. We are doing an injury rather than a favor when we recommend a student to a library school director when we, ourselves, would under no circumstances employ that same person in our own libraries.

Such a coöperative program should take the form of presenting to college students, preferably in their freshman year, before they have decided on their majors, the vocational possibilities of the whole library profession, setting forth its various phases — public, college, school, county, special, etc. — certainly a wide enough scope for all tastes. Along with this presentation should go suggestions for pre-professional courses similar to our pre-medical programs. There is no reason why, with proper promotion and co-operation between colleges and the library profession, students cannot be urged to decide early in their college careers to enter the library field and to plan accordingly.

In July 1934, Mr. Sidney B. Mitchell made a number of suggestions as to the means which might be used to attract the type of student we would like to see enter the profession. It must be admitted that we have all too often found the mediocre material entering, especially through the comparatively weak schools which cannot be too particular in their acceptance of students. I believe the staffs of our college and university libraries have more often deterred than

attracted students. Among other suggestions, Mr. Mitchell said: "... The building up of the college or university library staff, particularly in its public services, with some proportion of the type of person desired should be fairly effective in suggesting to the student body that here is a little known or understood field, worthy of investigation because it has appealed to young people like themselves." He also said: "Some . . . might be attracted to librarianship if they realized that it did not necessarily mean divorce from their chosen subject fields, but an opportunity to cultivate them in a less formal educational agency than the school or college." Certainly special departments of public and college libraries as well as special libraries would fall in this category.

All of us can call to mind individuals who may have a flair for a subject or for one of the arts and yet is no genius. Here is a fertile field in which to sow the seed of opportunity in the library profession. One instance that came to my attention will serve to prove my point. The granddaughter of a famous botanist wished to follow in the footsteps of her distinguished ancestor but, although trained and interested in the science, knew she did not have the ability to attain unqualified success. Hearing of the field of special libraries she took her library training, and is now happily engaged in a horticultural library where her knowledge of the subject aids her in doing research for scientists working in the field. So, we could go on multiplying instances — the art student who could never be a great painter but who could successfully administer an art library, or the musician who could never be a great pianist or violinist but could successfully administer a music library, and on through all the fields.

If such a coöperative plan with colleges could be initiated, what courses should

be suggested for the pre-professional work? In planning a college program, the primary consideration for the future special librarian should be natural bent, discovered in response to the question, what kind of special library would I be most interested in organizing or developing? Would it be in the field of chemistry, medicine, law, technology, business, insurance, finance? This decision having been made, the major should be chosen with this eventual goal in mind. However, regardless of subject matter of the special collections, there are certain courses that have proved their value to all special library workers. Wherever obtainable, I would suggest that courses should be taken in the social sciences, viz., general sociology, political economy, both general and business economics, general and applied psychology, statistics; in history, English composition, literature, languages, particularly modern, although Latin and Greek are almost imperative in a theological or religious library and would prove extremely valuable in a legal library; logic, which is useful later in classifying material. Other courses, which may be taken in college when available and when time allows or may be postponed to the technical training period, are those used in preparation for editorial work, such as proofreading, abstracting, and report writing.

If students who apply for admission to our library schools came with such a definitely planned pre-professional training, would not the argument that no one-year library course could cover all the subject demands be weakened, to say the least? Of course, I recognize that the mere study of a subject in college would not necessarily provide familiarity with special reference tools which the student would require in library work, but it would certainly give him a better starting point.

As I see the problem, the increasing

variation in types of present-day library service makes it impractical to subject all students to a uniformly inflexible training program. There are great differences in the relative importance of the subjects taught for librarians engaged in different types of work, and there are some subjects needed by special librarians which are omitted entirely.

We all admit that there are certain basic courses which every student must have, but could not these courses be shortened to give the fundamental principles and theory for all students, leaving the details of practical application to new courses adapted to the demands of special types of libraries?

To be specific — the special librarian needs to know the fundamentals of cataloging and classification, but does not need the details taught, for instance, regarding personal name entries, pseudonyms and antonyms, anonymous classics and the Bible, etc. Rather, does he need to know all the short cuts that can be used in order to make a book readily available with the least possible routine. Subject headings, on the other hand, are one of the most important and vital factors in special libraries procedure — not, however, the accepted lists which are not specific enough but rather the principles on which he can build a subject heading list to fit his own needs.

Book selection, on the whole, is not an important problem because so much of the material of special libraries is not in books, but in periodicals, particularly trade papers, newspapers, services, government documents, fugitive material, which are the warp and woof of his collection. How many students leaving our library schools have even a general, to say nothing of a detailed knowledge of these classes of materials or of how they should be treated? Does the new graduate know how to build an information file which is often his most valuable tool

when properly organized? Does he know how to evaluate sources and statistics, especially as to their comparability? Does he know how to write reports containing the answers to inquiries rather than merely providing the material that contains the answers?

I admit the problems that such questions pose for our library training agencies, but I feel that if these agencies would sit down with special librarians and discuss their needs, then experiment, at least a compromise could be worked out. Denver is trying one method, Columbia another, the good news comes that Simmons is to make another experiment next year. In addition, Columbia is inaugurating an evening course for librarians already employed, either untrained or lacking training in special libraries. This is to be confined to business libraries and is to be taught by one of our outstanding special librarians. This is progress, indeed, but much remains to be done. Our present-day curriculum has been the growth of years and with the changing times more changes must be made, and it will doubtless take more years before a satisfactory solution is found but, if a beginning is made, there is hope.

At this point, may I make one suggestion which, I am sure, can be adopted immediately? That is, that every library school should give its students a vital, live presentation of the opportunities in special libraries. I make this plea because of a recent experience I had. A student in one of our best schools visited me through a personal introduction and was pleased, delighted — but equally surprised — to hear my story of the special library field, as she had not heard it even mentioned in her school. I'd like to believe this is an isolated instance, but I fear that it is true in all too many cases. One lecture, by a properly qualified person, is the least that is due to students. Such a lec-

ture should set forth the differences between the work in special libraries and general libraries, the fields covered, the types of organizations having such libraries, the qualifications, the opportunities, the advantages and disadvantages and generally help the student to visualize this phase of the profession. This, while unsatisfactory, is not bad.

One other problem I must mention. In establishing special libraries courses, I feel that careful consideration should be given to those who are to teach these courses. Unfortunately, few, if any, of our present faculties have had any experience in the field and therefore are not conversant with the practical problems of the profession. On the other hand, practicing special librarians, while well equipped to give special lectures, are not versed in educational theories. This seems like an impasse but, personally, I would vote for the practical knowledge. In fact, I have long held the theory that

our library school instruction would be greatly improved if members of the faculties were to return to practical work for a stated period. Too much stress on academic presentation can be a danger.

To summarize, I suggest that the profession should take the following steps:

1. Present to college students the vocational possibilities of the library profession, setting forth its various phases — public, college, school, county, special, etc.;
2. Draw up suggestions for a prescribed pre-library course;
3. Use more discrimination in selection of library school students;
4. Revise the library school curriculum to present as required courses the principles and theory on which the work is based, with all other courses planned to meet the needs of those entering different phases of the work.

## What Training for the Special Librarian?

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**I**N CONSIDERING training for the special library worker, it would be well to examine first what is a special library and what is its function.

Linda H. Morley's definition is called by Rebecca Rankin<sup>1</sup> "the first one proposed in twenty-eight years that is acceptable generally." This definition reads:

"A special library is a service organized to make available all experience and knowledge that will further the activities and common objectives of an organization or other restricted group, with a staff having adequate knowledge in the field of specialization and of the activities of the clientele, as well as having professional preparation. Its function is:

1. To assemble information from published sources, both within and without the library.

2. To secure information directly by correspondence and interview from individuals and organizations specializing in particular fields.

3. To present this information at the appropriate time and place, on the initiative of the library, as well as upon request, that it may take an effective part in the work of the organized group served.<sup>2</sup>

What, then, is the preparation necessary for working in such a library? You will notice that Miss Morley, in her definition, says, "A staff having adequate knowledge in the field of specialization and of the activities of the clientele, as well as having professional preparation." Many proponents assert that knowledge of the special subject is the